The Oracle of Wolftrapp

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The Oracle of Wolftrapp

by LittleUggie

Summary

When Will's village is attacked, he is captured and sold into slavery, only to end up before Emperor Hannibal.

Notes

While this is still a work in progress, I actually have several chapters of this story written, but I'm still editing it so you might see periodic updates on it while other WIP are also being posted.

This was one of my first NaNoWriMo attempts. I wrote it like three years ago and haven't looked at it since despite the fact I have quite a few world building notes about it. Right now I have about 20,000 words written.

Prologue

The warning came to Will in the form of a nightmare, almost too late. Flashes of death and capture, the Darkened Forest where his clan lived set alight with fires. The sense of truth, of Seeing that he had trained from childhood, let him know that this was no ordinary night terror, but a premonition.

He leapt out of his bed, soaked with sweat, and threw on a pair of boots and breeches before swinging the raven feather cloak that marked position as Augur of his clan around his shoulders. His dogs woke up, milling in concern at his agitation. They followed, barking and howling as he ran the winding and well worn path to the village. So much the better to alert everyone, there was no time to be wasted. Quickly conjuring up an alarm spell, the large glowing orb appeared between his hands before he sent it shrieking and flashing to dart around the homes of the villagers. He continued through, ignoring the exclamations as confused and irritated clan members were woken from slumber.

He arrived at the circular clearing that served as the Armagh Clan's meeting place, climbing atop the stone platform in the center. His dogs circling around the base, occasionally howling in response to the still sounding alarm spell. Abigail, a young woman whom Will had something of a paternal soft spot for was the first to arrive after him, wearing a long sleeved nightgown.

"Will? What's happening?" Her face was pale and scared in the moonlight.

"I'll explain once everyone gets here." was his terse reply. Thankfully that didn't take long, everyone rushing to discover why their night was disturbed. Will recalled the orb and had just extinguished it when the Clan leader, Beverly came up to him.

"Augur Will, what's the meaning of this?" The words were harsher than her tone, but her eyes betrayed her worry. Will was not one for false alarms or unnecessary panic. She knew that whatever had caused him to rouse everyone was bad.

Will pitched his voice so he could be heard by the hundred or so members of the Armagh Clan.

“We are going to be attacked. Tonight.”

A tense silence fell over the crowd as they tried to come to terms with the announcement. From his vantage point, Will could see the initial shock, the knee jerk disbelief, before the consideration of who was delivering this news. The position of Augur was one of great respect and reverence to the clan. Will had been the Augur since he was thirteen and had always served them well. Finally, fear began to take hold of the crowd. Beverly saw it, too, she climbed on the platform to stand beside Will.

“Do you have anymore information for us, Augur? Who’s coming, why, what do they intend?”

Reasonable questions. Will took a shuddering breath, his panic since awaking waning a bit. It was still there in the back of his mind, but he knew the only way they might avoid bloodshed was with cool, clear thinking heads.

He closed his eyes, opening his inner senses to the energies surrounding him. There were the individual life forces of his fellow clan members.Then the deep collective energy of the place they were in, strong and vibrant, reinforced through tradition and belief, the heart of their village. It was comforting and familiar, similar to his raven cloak which every Augur of the Armagh clan had worn as far back as their clan history went, the origins of both lost to time. Will made himself look beyond his village, seeking whatever mysterious force that had sent the dream to him.

The vision hit him again, bolder than before. He Saw the rough looking band surrounding the camp, setting fire to the houses to smoke out the occupants. Fighters being cut down by flashing blades, clan members forced into cages and chains. A cruel smile on the face of a woman with red curls.

Will came back to himself, gasping for air. “Slavers,” he got out. “Or mercenaries, but they were gathering people up. They’re going to set the village on fire, kill anyone who resists. I think they’ll strike just before dawn.”

“How will they get through the woods?” Someone asked.

“Isn’t there some sort of spell to keep them out?” another voice called.

“I don’t know, and I’m not strong enough on my own to cast an effective barrier. Not one that would last.” Will answered.

Muttering broke out among the crowd, a few people were crying. The noise began to rise, increasing panic.

“Everyone!” Beverly bellowed, turning attention back toward her. “We’re going to evacuate. It’s not long until dawn, so we don’t have a lot of time. We will take the river to the capital. King Crawford will want to know of this. Anyone with a boat, go ready it. Everyone else, gather only what essentials you can carry and make your way to the dock as quickly as possible.”

With a plan in place, everyone rushed to motion. Will went to ready his own small fishing boat, knowing that every single vessel would be needed to ferry the whole clan. His dogs followed him. It ached to know he couldn’t take them with him. They might be in danger if they stayed in the village. He gave them the order to hunt, and they disappeared into the forest. Hopefully they would stay gone long enough for the threat to pass.

The clan worked fast, but it was still longer than he would have liked to get ready to go. They sent the boats off as they filled up. Will helped Beverly find places for everyone. The sky was beginning to lighten as the last few were loaded, when Will noticed the silence of the forest around them, nature’s warning that something was amiss.

An arrow shot from the darkness of the woods, hitting the hull of his boat a foot away from him.

“Hurry!” he shouted, the time for stealth was long past. He cast a shield spell, a bevy of arrows striking it as he rushed the last of the clan onto the boats, cramming them on until the boats dipped deep into the water.

A magic fireball hit his shield, causing it to weaken. The crunch of boots sounded in the underbrush.

“Is everyone on?” He called to Beverly.

“I think so!” she jumped into Will’s boat. He could hear the outraged shouts as the mercenaries realized their quarry was escaping. He started to follow Beverly when he heard a familiar voice cry out.

“Wait! Don’t leave me!” It was Abigail, she was running fast, one of the criminal band hot on her heels. His face was bleeding from where she had obviously put up a fight.

“Push off,” Will told Beverly.

“But-”

“Trust me.”

She hesitated, but pushed the boat into the current.

Will ran toward Abigail, throwing a blinding spell at her pursuer. Others were closing in on them, too. He grabbed her hand and they rushed toward the water, the boats already far out.

“Abigail, I want you to take this.” He took the raven feather cloak from his shoulders and threw it over hers.

“Will, what-”

“There is no time, Abigail. Please, be safe. Maybe, one day, we'll meet again. Put for now…” Summoning up all his energy, he cast out a physical spell. One of the hardest for him to do, making the air arcing to the now distant boat a solid bridge.

“Go, Abigail! I can’t hold it for long!”

“Will!”

“GO!”

She did, the cloak fanning out behind her, giving her the appearance of a startled black bird taking flight. He held on until he saw her swing over the side of the boat, and he let the bridge dissipate.

He fell to his knees, completely drained. The last thing he saw before darkness claimed him was a ring of furious mercenaries closing around him.

Chapter 2

The Armagh, had resided in the kingdom of Wolftrapp since before the Kingdom had even been established. While they may not be the largest of clans, they were certainly the oldest and arguably the most well known. The peoples' magic was reinforced through years of observed traditions. Their memories were long, stories and spells passed down through the generations. Their permanent settlement was right in the heart of the Kingdom's densest forest, long familiarity allowed it to be easily navigated by those who lived there. Outsiders found the journey to be far more treacherous. The woods seemed to act as an intelligent organism, turning people around and leading them toward dangerous terrain. If they were persistent, or wise enough to hire a guide, they eventually came upon the cozy village that appeared integrated into the forest itself. The houses built into trees or earth, one could almost miss it if they didn't know what to look for. Despite their reclusivity, most of the members of the Armagh Clan were friendly to strangers, eager to do trade and hear news from outside the forest.

Will was the latest in a long line of Augurs, the title of the clan's head mage. Augur's were revealed upon the death or retirement of the previous. The cloak of raven feathers that marked the position would appear and envelope the candidate. A powerful magic item whose origin was long lost, the raven feather cloak was said to contain the spirit of every previous Augur and served as protection for current. It cannot be removed by anyone other than the immediate Augur, if they are living. There were a few cases where the old Augur passed away and the cloak had to be removed and stored away until the next suitable Augur matured into their power.

Will became the youngest Armagh Augur's in living memory at age thirteen when the previous died of a sudden fever. Even then his unusual perception was already noted, so no one was surprised when he emerged shrouded in black feathers from the hut he shared with his sire by the river. The Augur was a revered position in the clan. They were the keepers of the Clan's history, which had once been passed down orally. Will was thankful that one of his predecessors had the foresight to record the stories in a series of thick tombs which was added onto by the following Augurs. They acted as teachers for those showing magical abilities. Occasionally they also acted as healers or defenders if the need arose. However, the main job of an Augur and where the title derived from was identifying omens and portents and divining their meanings.

Augur's were traditionally well-respected, but held somewhat apart from the general community. They never had spouses and rarely bore or sired children. The Augur's established dwelling was on the outskirts of the village. The nature of Augurs' abilities tended to make prolonged interaction with other people tiring. This was doubly so in Will's

case because he was so sensitive to the energies of others. The clan understood this and, for the most part, allowed him his privacy. They expected a bit of mystery and eccentricity from their Augur.

Will was a markedly gifted Augur, as well. It was said in whispers that he could see into a person's soul and reflect the truth of them back. More practically, he could find almost anyone as long as he had something connected to them. On extremely rare occasions, he received prophetic visions. They came to him in sleep or while in deep meditation and they were usually shrouded in shadow and symbolism that he had to sort out. Within the clan, he tended to be sought out whenever a person needed advice or help finding something, in addition to his position as teacher.

His abilities were such that he had become well known to the rest of the kingdom. Some called him a seer, which was more or less accurate. He saw and interpreted the signs written in nature and woven through the energies of all living things. Others called him the Oracle of Wolftrapp. There were probably only a handful of true Oracles to have ever existed, most of which were shunned as mad outcasts. Being intertwined so closely to the energies of time and fate took a heavy toll on those who were naturally adept. Their prophecies came out twisted and metaphoric, often not making any sense until after the foretold events had passed. True oracles were the puppets of the gods, born prior to times of change and upheaval. They were harbingers of ill times, and were feared and awed in equal turns.

Will was not a true Oracle, but he did on very rare occasion receive premonitions and visions outside of his mage abilities. Still, the tale of the Oracle of Wolftrapp spread throughout the kingdom and into the neighboring lands, even reaching the ears of those in the far north country of Baltania.

Chapter 3

He doesn't know how long he was unconscious, but when he awakens, he's chained in iron and caged. He takes stock of himself. His face aches, and there is a sharp pain in his ribs. They must have roughed him up some while he was out. He cracks his eyes. It's full light now, but he had no way of knowing if it is the same day.

He's moving, the cage is on a cart of some kind. He opens his eyes further. They are no longer in the Darkened Forest. The sun glares with no green canopy to cast shade. The natural energy of the forest which intertwines with that of his clan feels distant. He hopes everyone got to safety.

Cautiously he sits up. The cage was large enough he could both stand up or stretch out. A pit forms in his stomach as he realizes it had been meant to hold many more people. The chains attached to him clank. He freezes, not wanting to draw any attention yet, but the person driving the cart doesn't notice. He cannot see over the sides of the cart, but he hears the voices and movements of many more people..

He examines himself. All his injuries seem superficial, but magic suppressing cuffs had been locked around his wrists and ankles. He touches his neck, a magic suppressing collar elched with runes that seem to suck energy right out of his fingertips. These aren't cheap items to comeby. The mercenaries had come prepared.

This is worse than he feared. This wasn't some random raid. It was planned, but who would want to attack the Armagh? Even the other clans of Wolftrapp viewed Armagh with a great deal of respect, as it was the oldest of them. The questions spun in his mind, but even if he had the answers, they would not help him with his current predicament.

A strong breeze blew, making him shiver. He takes note of his clothing for the first time and feels panic crawl up his throat. Instead of the breeches, tunic, and boots he had on when he left his home, he is wearing a thin, sleeveless cotton shift. And nothing else besides the shackles and collar. No shoes or, to his horror, loin cloth were left on his person.

He takes several deep breaths as he adjusts to this new information, valiantly pushing disturbing 'what if's' out of his mind. He's cold and exposed. He peeks over at the driver

who's still taken no note of him. Slowly, mindful of the noise the chains, he reaches under the shift. His opening does not feel sore or tender. He is dry and his fingers showed no signs of blood or...other fluids. He's almost dizzy with relief. He's not been violated. *Yet* , his mind warns him.

Tucking the shift over his knees, he pulls his arms inside, curling them around himself to try and stay warm like a child might. He closes his eyes, trying to feel for the land's energies to give him some clue as to where they were, but the cuffs and collar prevented him from Seeing. His magic has been blindfolded and muzzled. The only energy he can feel is the thin thread that connects him to his clan. He is their Augur, and a bond such as that is not so easily smothered.

Judging by the sun's position, they were heading north away from the clan, who should be headed to the capital of Wolftrapp, Beauro, if they were not there already. Will feels queasy, and it had nothing to do with the rocking of the cart. If the mercenaries are headed to the north, he is most likely being taken to the infamous Quanticronia Market to be sold as a slave.

It's nearly dark by the time they stop, the sky turning a deep navy as dusk settled in. Will cannot stop shivering, his mouth is dry, and his stomach feels as if it is turning inside out from hunger. His physical suffering is trifling next to the roiling worry of his mind. The cart grinds to a halt and he hears the loud voices of the mercenaries around him, one authoritative feminine voice in particular barking orders to the group.

Footsteps approach, and the back of the cart is pulled down, revealing a surprisingly petite woman. Her hair is a mass of copper curls that he remembers glimpsing before passing out. She stands with an air of easy confidence, flanked by two brutish men who defer to her. She studies Will as if calculating how much she can get for his internal organs.

"So you're awake then. Care to explain how your entire clan, yourself excluded of course, escaped?"

Will doesn't say anything, fighting to keep his face impassive. He wants to spit in her face. She purses her lips.

“Oh, of course, introductions are needed before we can really get to know each other. I am Freddie Lounds, leader of The Tattlers. Perhaps you’ve heard of us? We have quite the reputation of getting dirty jobs done. Now, how did you all know we were coming?” Her voice starts out sugary sweet but turns sharp as a blade at the end.

“Maybe if I wasn’t freezing to death I’d feel more inclined to answer your questions.” He snaps.

She reaches through the cage and yanks the chain attached to his collar, slamming him against the bars. He gasps as his already bruised face hit the metal. His lip splits, dripping red onto the white shift.

“I don’t think you are in much of a position to be making commands, witch. The only reason I haven’t let the men have you is that you’ll fetch more with your virtue intact, and the gods know I’m going to need some sort of consolation prize after that disaster of a raid. But it’s a long way to the Market, and I can make your life a lot more uncomfortable than it already is. Bruises will certainly fade before we get there. So, it would be in your best interest to stay on my good side. Feel inclined to answer my questions now?” All this was said in a conversational, almost friendly manner.

Will seethes, but recognizes the futility of his position. He bites out an answer. “The Augur of my clan had a vision of your attack shortly before it was to occur.”

Freddie let him go, and he falls back, rubbing his throat around the hateful collar. She raises her eyebrows.

“A prophecy, huh? That famous Oracle of Wolftrapp that the bards like to wail on about?”

“The Oracle is just a tale. There have been lots of recorded instances of mages and other magic users having premonitions of danger.” Freddie isn’t listening. Her eyes were narrowed in thought as she considers him..

“We might be able to charge even more for the Oracle of Wolftrapp. Yes, we might be able to make something of this after all. Bennet!” She turns to one of the large men beside her. “Go

fetch the witch a blanket and some food.” A fox’s smile curls her mouth. “We have to take care of the merchandise after all.”

Chapter 4

With word of his abilities out in the world, the clan of Armagh found itself with an influx of visitors, all wanting something from ‘The Oracle of Wolftrap’. Even with the defense of the forest, many pilgrims found their way to his doorstep. He tried to help those he could. Many of them were just desperate for answers to what had happened to loved ones. Too often he found himself having to impart bad news. Some of them wouldn’t believe him and would leave angry and shouting.

Then there were the ones with darkness lurking behind their eyes, who sought him out for nefarious reasons. Monsters whose quarry was rightfully hiding. Those, Will refused to help, which they did not tend to take well. He grew adept at the use of defensive magic, and was protected to some extent by his cloak and the magic woven into the Augur dwelling. Still, he began to build a pack of loyal dogs which added an extra layer of security. They were also trained to run to the village for help should something happen.

For the most part, Will found the strangers to be minor annoyances, many of them asking for the impossible. He could not read minds or tell the future on command. He certainly couldn’t bring the dead back to life or teleport the lost person or object. On the few occasions he was actually able and willing to find a live person, he would infuse a spell into an object of the lost person to lead the seeker to them. There were three separate cases that he knew of that the seekers found who they’d lost. Two of them had sent a message thanking him, and one couple had come in person. Knowing he had helped someone for the better is what kept him from turning away every stranger who knocked on his door. Because the truth was, every time he opened himself up to other people, to read their energies and follow their lifelines, he felt as if he absorbed a part of them. They lingered within his subconscious and he felt crowded within his own mind. There was some truth to what they said about him. He often felt he did see into people's’ souls, but he didn’t reflect them. In that moment when he Saw, he became them.

The seeds of the Oracle of Wolftrapp rumours started on Will’s first trip to the Capital. Once a year, the leaders of all the clans of Wolftrap travelled to the capital, Beauro, where they were hosted at the castle by King Jack in what was called Meeting Time. This allowed the leaders an opportunity to discuss territory disputes, agree on trade routes, and generally find out the goings on of the kingdom. Many of the clan leaders, especially those from larger clans, travel with an entourage which often include mages,as it is always a good idea to have trained mages in case of meeting trouble on the road. The magic users also use the time to meet and exchange information and to study in the castle’s library.

He created quite a stir among the other clan's magic users. The Armagh's Augur was a unique and powerful position among the clans of Wolftrap. Many of the other mages were incredulous that someone so young could fulfill the role. They're opinions were quickly revised when he identified Queen Phyllis's wasting disease, not knowing that she had been intentionally hiding it as it was almost impossible to cure with even the most talented healers.

King Crawford was an accomplished mage himself, his talents lying in defensive magic. He was also very good at finding potential. After Will's impromptu diagnosis, the King asked Will if he might turn his Sight on a matter of safety within the kingdom. Feeling bad about exposing the Queen, he agreed. There had been a number of young boys who had disappeared from their homes, with no trace of where they had gone. Then one of the families was slaughtered a year to the day after the boy had vanished. Will went to the home of the family that was killed, their bodies still lying where they fell, the entire scene preserved by magic.

Will would never forget the feel of the energy in that house, dark and cloying. He reached inside himself, sending his Sight back to See what had happened. He watched as the missing boy gathered his family around him then killed them all, finishing with his mother. But there was something else there, a dark thread that Will followed with his mind. It led him to a vision of a dark fae. She was manipulating the boys and absorbing energy through their devotion and sacrifices. Her magic felt sickly sweet like rotting fruit.

He related this to the King, and the group was trapped at the home of one of the other boys. The fae was executed and the boys given over to healers who specialized in curse breaking. Will was hailed as a hero, even though he felt he hadn't actually done much, and stories began to spread, evolving to the point they contained only the barest grain of truth.

King Jack offered him a place in the castle, but was wise enough not to force the issue when Will declined. He was the Augur of Armagh and his first duty was to his clan. He did continue to travel to the yearly Meetings, but tried to avoid most of the other mages who now had the tendency to either fawn, dissect, or both. He spent most of his time there immersed in the castle library, which boasted a truly impressive number of books. If he had recurring nightmares of blood, bone, and rotting fruit, then that was no one's business but his.

Chapter 5

The next two weeks were the most uncomfortable of Will's life. He was taken out of the cage twice a day under guard so he could relieve himself. He was allowed to keep a rough, tattered blanket that did manage to cut the early autumn chill some. He was given some dried meat, berries, and water whenever they stopped for camp. His stomach protested the lack of substantial food for the first few days before forming into what felt like a tight fist. He honestly wasn't sure if he would be able to eat more even if it was presented, he was so full of anxiety. Freddie had not come to speak to him again, and the guards who took him out of the cage weren't interested in talking to him. He had only his own vivid imagination plaguing him with what awaited him to fill his days.

He took to standing, fists wrapped around the bars of the cage to keep his balance, trying to distract himself by watching the land they travelled through. He had never ventured this far north before. The only place outside the Darkened Forest he had really been to was Beauro. He was amazed by the Lectuanian Mountains looming in the distance. If they looked this large from here, they must be unimaginably massive up close.

They reached the twin bridges after a week, situated where the river forked off from Raindon Lake. The right bridge led to Baltania up near the mountains, the left bridge led to Western Wolftrapp. They crossed the left one, and a few days later come to a large boat dock at the mouth of the river. The whole company was loaded onto a barge, and carried across the Raindon Lake, a day's travel that placed them at the docks at the border of Quanticronia and their infamous Market.

Will begins to see people other than the Tattlers after they leave the barge. The docks, of course, are bustling with fisherman who made their living off of the Lake, as well as traders going to or from Baltania. The northern country had an abundance of natural resources, the most precious of which were their metal mines, occupied by dwarves, who send their immaculately crafted goods as well as raw materials down the North River to be traded in the southern countries.

As they draw closer to the Market, the crowds on the road grow, and Will is greeted with the sight of more people than he had ever seen before in his life, even more than the yearly Meeting of the Clans at Beauro. They are all packed together. Tents and stands line the road between residences and businesses.

The country of Quanticronia was quite small compared with the three countries surrounding it. It was also not governed by a monarch like Wolftrapp to the south, Baltania to the north, or Muskrany to the west. Instead, the country was run by a collective council from the various guilds headquartered there. The Market, while geographically to the far east of the country, was the true heart and breath Quanticronia.

It was said that anything that could be imagined could be found at the Market, as well as many things unimaginable. If it could be commodified, than someone at the Market was selling it. Traders, merchants, and buyers congregated from all over the lands, even from across the Farse sea and from the far desert lands beyond the border of Wolftrapp. The result was a riot of people and color, cultures clashing and blending. A sheer overwhelming spill of moving, heaving life.

Even through his suppressing bindings, Will can feel the roiling energy of the place. It sets his teeth on edge and beats at his temples. He's never experienced anything like this before, accustomed as he is to the ancient, slow pulse of his home in the Darkened Forest. He hunkers down in his cage so he doesn't have to see the press of people or their considering looks. He is not a person to them. He is merchandise, like Freddie had said. An object with a price tag attached to be examined, haggled over, and eventually sold to the highest bidder. He curls into a ball, pressing his face to his knees, eyes closed, shutting out the sound of the strange chaos surrounding him. He imagines he is fishing in the river back home, his dogs around him, nothing but the serene sounds of nature, familiar and comforting.

This daydream is brutally interrupted, when the cage is opened and he's yanked out. His captors half drag, half carry him toward a building with a gaudy facade. He has time to glimpse a sign proclaiming 'The Menagerie' before he is shoved through the door. The inside is even more ostentatious than the outside, draped in deep red velvet with silk couches and lounges placed strategically around the room. It is fairly empty at the moment, with only a young man who could not be more than fifteen dusting the corners. A bell chimes as Freddie enters behind Will and her henchman.

"Dimmond?" the mercenary called out. "You around? I got a business proposition for you."

"Freddie Lounds, is that you hollering? Stop that, you'll upset my pets." A man of middling years, though obviously trying to look younger, saunters into the room. He wears an expensive looking waistcoat in dark green. His eyes immediately snap to Will and he can see the appraisal in his eyes..

“This,” Freddie pushes Will forward, causing him to stumble. She gestures dramatically. “Is the Oracle of Wolftrapp. The *virgin* Oracle of Wiolftrapp. Pretty rare to find one of those in captivity, hmm? Worth some serious shine if you ask me.”

Dimmond raises an eyebrow, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

“Well, the virgin part will be easy enough to ascertain. But how do you prove the Oracle is even real, much less that this,” he waves a hand toward Will, “is said Oracle?”

Freddie shrugs, unconcerned. “What proof is there otherwise? If you spin the story right, people will believe anything.”

“You missed your calling as a bard, Freddie.”

“Maybe.” She grins like a fox again. “But you can ask a lot more for the Oracle than some regular mage. You know there’ll be some dumbass come along with more money than sense.”

“That’s true.” The man looks thoughtful. He grabs Will’s face, tilting his head this way and that. Will just barely resists the urge to bite him.

“To the back. I’ll need to examine the goods to make sure I’m getting my money’s worth.” Dimmond snaps his fingers and two well muscled women appear out of the shadows.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” Freddie hands over his chains and he is forced to follow the two women further into the gilded prison of a building.

Chapter 6

Abigail hugs the raven feather cloak to her chest as the first of the Armagh's boats unload onto the Beauro docks. A messenger crow had been sent ahead, and contingent of royal guards as well as one of the King's advisors was waiting to escort the group to the castle. Abigail had taken the cloak off as soon as the village dock was out of sight and her heart had stopped pounding. It wasn't right for her to wear it. She was no Augur. She could only do simple magic, mage lights and directional spells. Will had taught her. She bit her lip. Will had sacrificed himself so she could get to safety. He shouldn't have waited for her. He is important to the clan, and she is just the daughter of a hunter who'd been taken by the forest.

It happened sometimes. The clan felt it was the price of living within the Darkened Forest. People would wander off into the woods and later be found, dead, yet unmarked with looks of peace on their faces. Some said that their souls became one with the forest and acted as guardians of the clan. Abigail wasn't so sure. She had only known one other person who had been taken, Randall. He had always been a bit wild, taking too much joy in the hunt. She had seen the way he looked at people. Her father had taught her to hunt, to hone her instincts. When Randall looked at her she felt like prey. The same way she felt when her father looked at her the last time she saw him. The forest protected the clan, even from itself.

Abigail had never been to the capital before. The farthest she had been from the village was a trading post at the fork of the Raindon River. In any other circumstances she would be excited, but all she feels now is numb and cold, not taking anything in as they pass through the castle gates and into a courtyard. It is not until she hears Beverly call her name that she shakes herself out of the fog she has been drifting through.

She steps forward. Beverly had been talking to a broad, dark skinned man of middling years. He looked like a man accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed without question. Abigail gulped as his eyes fell on her. Should she bow or something? She clutches the cloak tighter, the feathers rustling beneath her fingers. Will would know what to do. Or rather, she amended in her head, he'd do whatever he was going to do regardless and not worry about pointless social niceties. She settles for nodding respectfully.

King Crawford looked weighed down and concerned, but not offended. "Beverly tells me that you saw the raiders?"

“Yes sir.” She glances at Beverly, who nods encouragingly. “I had gone to one of the hunting stands because I had left my longbow there, and I saw two men I didn’t know creeping up the path toward the village. I waited until I thought they couldn’t hear and climbed down and tried to get to the dock as quickly as possibly, but someone caught me. I had my knife and managed to get him to let me go. I think I slashed his face.” She had noticed blood on her hands and clothes after she reached the boat. “I ran as fast as I could and I saw the boats leaving. The raiders were right behind me. Will-” Her voice wobbles, but she continues, “gave me the cloak and cast a spell so I could reach the boats. I-I didn’t see what happened to him.” She swallows hard. “The cloak hasn’t chosen a new Augur. That means he’s still alive.” She looks desperately at the two faces, all but begging them for reassurance.

“There’s always hope,” Beverly tells her. “Will is intelligent and powerful. I’m sure he’ll find his way back to us if-if he can.”

“There was an attack on one of the western clans, as well. Only a few made it out. They said they were looking to capture. I will send a troop to check on your village. Perhaps with no people to flush out, they left the buildings standing.”

“Thank you, my King.”

The advisor who had brought them to the castle had been hovering quietly at the king’s side. She speaks up now. “What I find most concerning is how they made their way through the Darkened Forest.”

“You suspect something, Advisor Bloom?” The king asks

She frowns, her face creasing in concern. “They had to have had a guide, probably a mage, to lead them through safely.”

“Someone betrayed the clan,” Beverly’s face hardens in a grim mask of anger. It is a terrifying look on the usually cheerful leader’s face.

King Crawford looks thunderous. “Someone betrayed the kingdom.”

Chapter 7

They take him to a bath chamber, with a tile mosaic of a topless mermaid displayed on the floor in front of a sunken tub big enough to fit ten people. He tries not to think about what sort of things have gone on in that tub. At least it is warm in here. One of the women goes over to a brazier filled with round stones set above a small fire. She pours water on them and with a loud sizzle, steam begins to curl around them.

“Alright, let’s see what we have here.” Dimmond bustles, all brisk buisness now. He unlocks Will’s wrist cuffs, just long enough to pull his now filthy cotton shift off. Will briefly considers fighting, but decides it was not worth it when he has no escape plan or resources. He eyes the arm muscles on one of the women. Well, it’s not like he has the strength to fight free even if there was a fast horse and sack of gold waiting outside.

“A bit skinny.” Dimmond comments as he walks around him, inspecting him as one might a horse for sale. “But some like that. Lovely curls, pity they aren’t longer. Nice skin, pale, few blemishes.” She grasps his chin, forcing his head up again. He flinches away.

“None of that now.” He reaches around and slaps him on his left buttock. He cries out, more in surprise than pain. The grip on his chin tightens.

“While you are part of my Menagerie, you will obey my rules. You are a product. I own you until you are sold. If you make trouble, or try to scare off potential buyers, you will be sent to the punishment rooms, and believe me when I say you do not want to end up there. Understand?”

Will has to swallow down the rage that boils in his chest. He wants to lunge at this man and tear his throat out with his teeth before snapping Freddie’s neck, but he has no magic, no friends, no rights here. He has to play by their rules until something came along that he could turn to his advantage.

“Yes.” He bites out.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

“At least you’re clever enough not to get mouthy. Now look at me.”

He does, not bothering to hide his seething hatred. For the first time the man looks taken aback.

“With those eyes I could almost believe you are the Oracle. They look straight through a person.”

“So you’re buying then?” Freddie is lounging in the doorway, looking bored.

“Yes, I believe so.” Dimmond says. “I think this one will be quite the attraction.”

Will is scrubbed pink by a pair of grim faced attendants while Freddie and Dimmond go to haggle over his price. They also give him an extremely embarrassing and invasive examination to confirm his virginity. He is then wrapped in a rough towel and taken to a small, windowless room with a bed, washbasin, and chamber pot. A few moments later, a tray with some porridge and tea is brought to him as well as a clean shift of surprisingly good material. He eats eagerly, the fresh food much appreciated after living for weeks on dried meat and water. The hot food settles heavily in his stomach, and he finds his eyelids drooping. He curls up under the covers on the bed and finds it surprisingly comfortable. Of course a straw pallet would feel comfortable after the metal cage. He tells himself not to feel grateful for these seeming luxuries. This place is still a cage, a prison. Even worse, it’s a market and he is what’s for sale. He falls asleep to the mental image of the red velvet of the sitting room going up in flames.

He is awakened sometime later by the same attendants who had bathed him. He isn’t exactly sure how much time has passed without the sun to orient him, but he thinks that it might be the next day. One woman carries a simply designed, flowing garment in a deep blue and a small wooden box which she sets on the bed. The other has a wash basin and towel. Without speaking, they efficiently strip him bare and give him a quick freshen up. Then they wrestle

him into the clothes. The box turns out to hold an array of grooming implements and cosmetics. They spend an intolerable amount of time fussing with his hair and applying rouge, kohl, and powder to his face. It makes his skin feel dry and itchy. His hands get slapped when he tries to rub at it. Then one of them shoves a small brush coated with some salty tasting paste in his mouth and he has to endure that as well. Though his mouth did taste better after they gave him some water to rinse it out.

Once he is trussed up to their satisfaction, they each take an arm and lead him through the building. They pass many identical doors and he sees other 'merchandise,' easily identifiable by the collars, being taken in the same direction. They are brought to a large, airy room with a panel of mirrors along one wall. He and about fifteen other slaves are directed into a line facing them, two other slaves have magic suppressing runes like Will.

Will didn't have much experience with mirrors. There wasn't much use for them in the village. There was a highly polished metal plate that had been passed down by one of the previous Augurs, but he didn't spend much time looking at himself in it. He'd heard that some of the mages who study at the capital used mirrors for scrying. He'd never tried it himself, but now he wished he had. Maybe even with the suppressors he'd be able to catch a glimpse of his clan in the shining wall. At the moment, all they reflected were the thin and draw faces of the slaves.

Dimmond enters the room, dressed even more lavishly than yesterday. Will watches him approach in the mirror. He walks down the line, tutting to himself.

"Stand up straight, the better to present your assets. Eyes down respectfully, but keep your face up so the customers can see it. Hmmm." He repositions a few to his liking, treating them like dolls. He reaches Will, circling him.

"Lily, Mary, a little less rouge next time if he doesn't sell today. We don't want to distract from those eyes overmuch."

"Yes, sir." The attendants respond, moving around, poking and prodding at the others..

Dimmond goes and stands before the line, addressing them directly for the first time.

“Now, here is what is going to happen. In a few moments, we will begin admitting customers. They will be examining you, but are not allowed to touch unless I say so. You will not speak or move unless given explicit instructions by me. If you do, you will be punished. If you attempt any communication with the customers or other slaves without permission, you will be punished. If I’ve given you leave to speak or move, and you insult or attempt to harm any customers, you will be punished. Know this, your collar has a spell on it that allows it to be tracked, so don’t get any ideas about trying to run. If I get wind that you are even thinking about running, you will be punished severely. When you are sold, the key to your collar and cuffs will be given over to your new owner directly after transaction of payment. What happens to you after that is up to their discretion. Do you all understand?”

Will nods, but a few had murmured agreement and they are swiftly struck by the attendants.

“What did I just say?” Dimmond shakes his head. “No talking! Listen and obey. That is what you do. That is all you do. *Is that understood*?”

They all nod silently.

“Wonderful. Lily, show the first lot in.”

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